

CONCERNS OF FRENCH IMMERSION PARENTS  
IN SUPPORTING THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING AT HOME

by

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### ABSTRACT

This research project sought to identify the concerns of anglophone, French Immersion parents of elementary school children in Northern British Columbia with respect to their perceived needs in supporting their children's academic learning. A qualitative, focus group approach was used in order to provide depth of information. Six parents of Early French Immersion students attended. This parent sample indicated interest in learning French themselves, particularly basic vocabulary, grammatical constructs of the language, and elements of pronunciation. Services desired from teachers or tutors included tapes of stories, vocabulary and dictée words for student use at home as well as help with French homework. The parents were adamant about the importance of regular contact with the teacher and made suggestions regarding access to informal discussion times. Bilingual planners and more regular use of the student planners for relaying information were recommended. These parents also desired more contact with French-speaking individuals for their children outside of the classroom.

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## Introduction

### *Statement of the Problem*

In this research I conducted a focus group comprised of anglophone parents of early French Immersion students to assess their perceived needs in supporting their children's learning. It is my experience, through parent-teacher interviews and informal conversations, that parents have many questions and experience many frustrations around their child's early French language development, particularly with respect to reading and writing. They often want to be involved in assisting with these areas and with homework on a regular basis, yet given their lack of proficiency in the language of instruction they are unsure how to proceed. The purpose of this study was to determine which issues parents would identify as being of primary concern and to search for common elements of concern. It was hoped that this information would provide a starting point from which I could generate ideas for types of support that teachers, the school, and/or the school district might be able to offer to better meet Immersion parents' needs and thereby enhance the learning environment for the students.

### *Definition of Terms*

*Anglophone:* Persons having English as their primary language of communication and having little or limited mastery of French.

*Canadian Parents for French (CPF):* This is an organization of parents which promotes French language instruction for all children in Canada.



*Core French:* A program in which French is taught as a separate subject taught to all students beginning in Grade 5, and then optionally from Grades 9 to 12, in British Columbia. It is also referred to as Basic French or F.S.L. (French as a Second Language).

*French Immersion (Early Immersion):* A second language program beginning in Kindergarten or Grade 1 in which French is the language of instruction for all or most of the school day.

*Late French Immersion (Late Immersion):* A French Immersion program with an entry point in Grade 4 or later. I use the term later-entry to refer to students who join an early Immersion program after Kindergarten.

*Parents:* For my purposes the terms *parents* and *families* are used interchangeably and one parent, guardian, or stepparent will represent the views of one family unit within the focus group.

*Parent Advisory Council (PAC):* This refers to a group of parents representing both English and French Immersion stream students who meet to plan fundraising and to support the learning for all students in the school.

*Local Parents for French:* This refers to the local chapter of the Canadian Parents for French.

### *Background to the Problem*

Early French Immersion began in this small city in Northern British Columbia in the mid-1980s thanks to a small but committed group of parents. The model mimics many programs found elsewhere in Canada in that French is the primary language of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 7. Formal teaching of English does not commence until Grade 3 at which time it occupies 20% of instruction time. It is

noteworthy that this and many other Immersion programs exist in English-only communities and within Anglophone families. The fact that French Immersion programs exist in all ten provinces, as well as in Yukon and Nunavut territories, attests to its widespread acceptance in non-francophone environments (Canadian Parents for French, 2000). Administrators agree that parents are concerned about the Immersion program. McGillivray (1990) points out that Immersion parents “need more frequent reassurance that their children are progressing normally.... [and] need to be advised, clearly and quickly, if their children are having special difficulties” (p. 111). Why do they need this reassurance? What are the main concerns of Anglophone Immersion parents regarding their children’s progress?

The local French Immersion program is well publicized as an option for new Kindergarten-age children. Usually a group of 18 to 20 children begin French Immersion Kindergarten each autumn. Districts elsewhere have also implemented formal Middle and Late Immersion programs in which students enter as a class group between Grade 4 and Grade 7. Across Canada, in 1997-1998, there were 60,243 students registered in Early French Immersion and a further 9,817 enrolled in Late Immersion programs in elementary schools (Canadian Parents for French, 2000). The local school district is now examining the feasibility of opening a Late Immersion program in the 2002-2003 school year. However, in a somewhat unusual move, our school has for the past five years sought to respond to parent demand and increase program enrolment through accepting English program student transfers at later grades into Early French Immersion. In our school, for the 2000-2001 school year, there were four new registrations in Grade 1, two in Grade 2, and five in Grade 3. In September 2001 another five English program

students joined the French Immersion program at various points from Grade 1 to Grade 4 resulting in a total elementary Immersion population of 134 students.

The task of learning in a second language poses a challenge for all Immersion participants. The students come from anglophone homes. French Immersion teachers are required to follow all expectations of the regular provincial curricula. The language of instruction, however, is exclusively French from Kindergarten through Grade 2 for all subject areas. For later-entry students this demand is understandably even more onerous. Though these students lack the early French language experience, they immediately find themselves faced with learning and communicating in a new language in all subject areas. Not surprisingly, parents, students, and teachers often report high levels of stress and frustration. Furthermore, learning assistance time is extremely limited and, in fact, has been cut to only one day per week to service the 134 elementary students. There are already many children who have entered the program in Kindergarten who require assistance in learning to speak and read French. At our school, therefore, many teachers feel that those who enroll later by choice should not receive priority for in-school assistance. Little wonder parents often informally express concern about their child's progress and profess a lack of understanding of their child's skill development. The question therefore arises as to what the main concerns of these parents might be and what they feel might be beneficial in allowing them to support their Early or later-entry Immersion child's learning.

Given that the Immersion program is a parent-driven initiative, the level of parent commitment is generally high. French Immersion parents are often visible in the school and involved in the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and the Canadian Parents for French

(CPF) groups. While the school district voluntarily provides busing for Immersion students living on an existing bus route, many parents choose to drop off and pick-up their children. In my Grade 2 class, currently comprising 20 students, at least eight of them usually have a parent waiting for them at dismissal. This gives the parents the potential for a great deal of contact with their child's learning environment and allows them frequent interaction with the classroom teachers and with the school administration.

In spite of this apparently frequent contact, parents often express concern about their child's progress in reading French and wonder if they should be teaching English reading at home. They speak of difficulties assisting with French Dictée words (spelling lists) and unfinished work that is to be completed at home. When a French Immersion child experiences developmental delays or difficulty in learning to read and write, the parents express particular frustration at being unable to work in French with them. As a result some begin to question whether Immersion is a good placement for their child.

The current situation in which a number of parents are enrolling their students for late entry into the program seems to indicate room for growth and faith in the Immersion approach to learning. Would they have been more willing to consider the Immersion option at the Kindergarten level if an increased support network had been in place to help them support their child's learning at home? This study, through opening discussion around parent concerns, needs, and wishes, might allow some insight into the types of support these Anglophone parents desire.

Historically, parental concern surrounding the French Immersion program seems rooted in intellectual achievement. In 1985 it was said that "68.2 percent of Canadians ... believe that their children should learn French at school to become bilingual. [Their main reasons are] better employment opportunities, intellectual development, cultural

enrichment, and travel possibilities” (Canadian Parents for French, 1985, p. 15). In Ontario, Olson and Burns (1983) concluded that, “ increased job security and, following closely, the desire to see the child learn a second language (not necessarily French) were listed in our data by both teachers and parents as primary program determinants” (p. 351). Is intellectual achievement also a primary concern in this area of Northern British Columbia? This focus group sought to uncover the main concerns currently felt by Immersion parents in supporting their child’s intellectual development and what they felt they needed in order to provide more effective assistance.

### *Educational Significance*

This focus group study allowed parents a forum in which to identify how they help their children at home, their concerns, and ways in which they would like to be of greater assistance. It is hoped that these results will allow the school and school district to better respond to parent needs, thereby improving the overall integrity of our school’s French Immersion program and potentially resulting in greater academic success for the students and improved retention of students. This outcome represents the greatest possible gain from this project: that students could experience more success in school. Having gathered the information regarding their specific needs the school and the school district will be in a better position to respond to the parents. As a result, it is possible also that parents may feel a heightened connection to the French curriculum and become more satisfied with the learning environment provided for their child.

In the face of continuing budget cuts that result in reduced time for services to special needs students (those needing learning assistance and other forms of in-school support), any support that parents can provide their children is more essential than ever. Through the completion of this project the school district and the school stand to potentially reduce the number of disgruntled and worried parents, which in turn may result in improved retention of students and more new registrations in the French Immersion program.

Another primary motivator for the gathering of information is that there was little such work documented to date. In my search of the literature it became evident that the Canadian Parents for French are the only real source of information for English speaking parents regarding supporting their child's French language development. Though their recommendations are common sense and, for the most part, achievable, the fact remains that residents of communities in Northern British Columbia lack nearby resources to provide French language enrichment for their children. Furthermore, while the CPF responds to parent questions, they have not conducted formal research and documented their findings about the types of concerns raised regionally across Canada. Typically, quantitative approaches such as surveys have been undertaken to determine the parent's level of contentment with Immersion programs. While these parents may well have faith in the Immersion approach, I felt it was important to allow our parents to explore their issues and concerns. This resulted in conclusions of greater depth and led to recommendations better suited to Northern and isolated communities.

#### *Problem Statement*

In this research project, I organized a focus group of English-speaking parents of elementary-age, French Immersion students to identify:

- a) the issues of primary concern to Anglophone parents regarding assisting their Immersion children at home, and,
- b) the types of support that Anglophone parents from our school would find useful in supporting their Immersion child's learning.



## Literature Review

### *History of Parent Studies in Immersion*

There has developed over the past thirty years a body of research related to French Immersion in Canada. Names such as Genesee, Hart, Lapkin, Obadia, Swain and Tardif emerge regularly when perusing the research in French Immersion. The emphasis in the literature has been centered on three areas: a) program reviews, b) program evaluation, and c) instructional practice. Very little research has been undertaken regarding extra-curricular and co-curricular supports necessary for second language learning or on the role parents should take in the process.

The research focus with respect to parents has been limited to quantitative surveys of their overall contentment with the programs in which their children are enrolled. According to Burns and Olson (1983), parents felt that the Immersion program in northern Ontario succeeded in offering their children a culturally enriching experience, provided the opportunity to master a second language, and resulted in better access to jobs. McEachern (1980), however, points out that parents were most concerned about their child's academic achievement when enrolled in French Immersion. More recently, Wall (cited in Canadian Parents for French, 2000) stated that "time and time again, the problems of French Immersion in 2000 eerily resemble those of the mid 1970s ... attrition rates are too high...and much more must be done for special needs children" (p. 19).

### *Current Supports for Parents*

One of the most energetic and politically powerful proponents of French education in Canada is the Canadian Parents for French (CPF) association. This group boasts membership from across each province and territory. Because French is an official

language, it seeks to promote French learning through Core and Immersion second language programs. The CPF works to inform parents, teachers and administrators about the benefits of second language learning. Members review research and provide articles and reports regarding the latest findings. It publishes a report annually that assesses French education across Canada, province by province, and highlights problem areas and directions for future focus. Through its advocacy role, books and pamphlets, and highly publicized awareness campaigns, the CPF proves itself a great ally for French Immersion parents.

In one CPF publication, Whale (1990) provides a parent's perspective of what can be done to promote French learning and help with homework. She suggests that parents must, first and foremost, maintain a positive attitude about French education and provide access to French outside the classroom whenever possible. In addition, her list of supports that parents themselves can provide includes reading to the child in English, learning the basics of French pronunciation, providing resource materials at home (such as dictionaries and verb books) and offering French radio, television and movies on a regular basis. She suggests that having the child tape her own Dictée (spelling) words and having the child summarize the main ideas from a French text can also help alleviate some difficulties.

#### *Related Research on Ways to Support Learning*

I found four pieces of research that linked the general theme of offering support for second language learning and provided some insight as to areas of concern and possible interventions. However, none was based on consultation with parents regarding



their views. The following paragraph summarizes the data collection techniques and purpose of each of the four studies.

In the first of the four studies, Ludanyi (1972) provides an overview of a program offered in Derby, Vermont in 1971. It outlines a program implemented to promote increased literacy skills for English and Franco-American students through instruction in the alternate language. Weekly discussions, similar to focus group sessions, occurred between the participating teachers as a way of determining progress and concerns. Secondly, the handbook *Using the Foreign Language Assistant: A Guide to Good Practice* (Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges, 1977) is used by French language assistants in British schools. It primarily offers ideas for activities to supplement regular programming and suggests contacts parents might make for their children outside of class time. The third study, by Klinck (1980), consists of an evaluation of a French drop-in center at the University of Calgary that sought feedback from the adult participants and offers advice on elements that may be lacking in second language support programs. Finally, Williford (1979) assesses the success of their High School Foreign Languages Tutoring Program in Memphis in which high-school students received course credit for designing and instructing activities with elementary children. The data consists mainly of the administrators views supported by feedback from participating secondary students gathered informally. This document also provides a bank of ideas that were found useful in instructing young Immersion students.

Ludanyi (1972) presents information regarding bilingual education projects that provided bilingual education programs in a variety of schools. In some cases the goal was to help Franco-American students achieve improved English literacy skills (measured by

standardized tests) through instruction in both French and English. In other cases the intent was to further second language acquisition for Anglophone students through French instruction. Often two teachers were assigned to a class or a teacher's aide was provided. All participating teachers attended at least 12 weeks of training in the history and constructs of bilingualism and biculturalism, as well as sessions focused on linguistics and core subject instructional methodology. Furthermore, most schools offered weekly sessions as a forum for discussing relevant issues and for providing ongoing training. In all cases, continuous upgrading and training provided instructors the skills needed to implement the program.

Where information about resource materials was provided, the focus was on reading, writing and grammar instruction. Also prevalent was the use of games, dances, songs, art and stories to provide a French-Canadian cultural connection. Though specifics were lacking in the Ludanyi (1972) report, many of these ideas may prove valuable to parents and others who seek to support elementary Immersion students. Since it is unlikely that current budgets would provide for multiple teachers or the addition of support workers in a classroom, this study would lend support for the idea that through achieving basic French language skills and cultural awareness, parents can foster improved skills in their children.

A British program existed in which a foreign language assistant was hired to work in secondary schools throughout a school year. The Central Bureau for Visits and Exchanges, 1977, proposes guidelines for effectively utilizing the skills of the assistant included allowing for small group instruction both during and after formal lesson times, team teaching similar content alongside the regular teacher, and splitting the classes to

provide two different lessons within one room. Specific activities outlined included picture description (students draw what is described orally), role playing, reading practice, language dictation, conversation sparked by an interesting artifact such as a photo or postcard, language games, songs, grammar practice and listening comprehension through story re-telling.

This British resource document also mentioned that the foreign language assistant might provide after-hours tutoring in some cases. This is a valuable idea in our local context since few persons fluent in French are available, though there is a federal program that provides a French Language Monitor to support second language instruction bi-annually in the schools.

Klinck (1980) provides another look at French language assistants, albeit this time in an extra-curricular, university setting in Calgary, Alberta. The goal of this French drop-in center was to help students develop conversational skills and assist with grammar in a non-threatening “miniature immersion” (p. 1) environment. This environment was created through the provision of a comfortable lounge for language students in which a variety of materials was made available, including books, tapes and magazines. There were also francophone language monitors who provided conversation and assistance with homework. In the evaluation of the survey results, Klinck (1980) indicated that students desired more help with grammar and greater “cultural insights” (p. 11). She surmised this could be accomplished through presentations by speakers, or through slide shows or readings. The connection to the current study is limited due to the fact that local elementary Immersion students are obviously not adult learners and that these parents might express quite different language goals for their children. Some similarity may

emerge, however, between the views of these university students and those of the local parents as they voice their concerns in helping their children.

The notion of cultural connections also has merit because, like Calgary, our community is distanced from Quebec and faces difficulties in helping students relate to the French language in real contexts. The Klinck (1980) program review supports the use of French videos, French television shows, and guest speakers whenever possible might help bridge the cultural gap and provide examples of French in real world contexts.

Williford (1979) summarized a program that existed in Memphis, Tennessee during the late 1970s. High school foreign language teachers worked in conjunction with second-language students who earned course credits by developing lessons and activities for use in elementary schools. The emphasis was conversational, only the older student tutors used written materials. Given that the secondary students had a shorter school day, they were able to spend time in the elementary schools twice per week after their regular hours. Materials focused on vocabulary themes and included pictures, tapes, posters, charts and overhead transparencies. Activities mentioned were games, songs, fashion shows and skits.

The provision of suggested activities is useful. There is even greater value, though, because this approach utilized people with second language ability who would be available in any community. Williford (1979) also comments on the lack of financial support for second language programs and points out that this arrangement does not necessitate additional cost. This provides a valuable option for consideration, particularly in a community distant from French cultural centers.

*Summary of Research*

According to Whale (1990), parents are in a position to encourage language exploration through provision of resource-rich settings free from continuous error correction. In this regard, one could even view an Anglophone home as advantageous to Immersion learning as the child can become the language “expert” in the home and even take on the role of instructing others as he or she learns new vocabulary and structures. It has also been noted by Whale (1990), Ludanyi (1972), and Klinck (1980) that a French cultural connection needs to be made for the children. Based on this, recommendations for parents include providing access to French songs, videos, television, travel and tutoring. In any event, it is clear that there are possible solutions to the dilemma of providing context-rich assistance for Anglophone immersion students in English communities. Though little formal research has been published to date as to the efficacy of specific approaches, many ideas were available within these related and available sources.

This project seeks to more formally develop with parents a list of desired co-curricular supports for Immersion students outside of the classroom, and to collaboratively plan implementation of strategies toward the goal of improved support. Subsequently, specific activities could be planned and undertaken and then, through surveys or testing, the approaches could be assessed. This could lead to the development of a research base of recommendations and valuable tools for assisting French Immersion students with language literacy outside of the regular classroom setting.

## Design and Methodology

### *Sampling Strategy*

Once the approval of the UNBC Ethics Committee was obtained, I commenced by sending a letter to the local school district and to my school administration to request permission for the study. (A copy of this letter is in Appendix A.) Once this permission had been secured I sent a letter to the parents of the French Immersion children in our school to identify potential participants in the focus groups. (This letter can be found in Appendix B.) This letter was distributed through the students and I secured the support of the school secretary in gathering the documents of interested candidates. Parents were given up to two weeks to respond and indicate their interest. Each form returned was date stamped upon receipt.

### *Sample Size*

For this study I sought the opinions of Anglophone French Immersion parents of elementary-age children. This represents a limited population (approximately 100 families) within this small city in Northern British Columbia and so it was decided that the study sample would include those parents who would volunteer to participate. This form of purposive sampling allowed all Anglophone Immersion parents to consider participating, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results. On the other hand, this sampling technique encouraged those with a variety of strong views, and ensured participant understanding of the topic (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

*Instrument*

This project involved the coordination of several chronological components that included requesting participation in the focus group, implementing the group interview session, and analyzing and reporting the findings to the stakeholders. The focus group approach was used in order to provide greater depth of information regarding the concerns felt by Immersion parents. According to Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996), “the goals [of focus groups] are to conduct an interactive discussion that can elicit a greater, more in-depth understanding of perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences from multiple points of view” (p. 16). In this case a range of ideas and opinions were desired, making a focus group a preferred choice over individual interviews. The group interview format also allowed participants to support or disagree with ideas as well as respond to other’s ideas (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996).

Recall there has been little exploration into this field to date. Past studies have taken the form of surveys that have tabulated the overall contentment of immersion parents without allowing for in-depth discussion of open-ended questions. Therefore a qualitative approach is novel and may provide more information to help focus our future efforts at improving the local Immersion program.

At this point I needed to design the focus groups. There was to be a maximum of two groups, each comprising six to ten participants. As it turned out, nine parents signed up as participants allowing for a single focus-group interview. These parents were then contacted by phone. They were thanked for their interest in the study and informed of the date and time of the focus group meeting. Subsequently a note reminding them of the date and time was sent home with their child. It was made clear that only one parent was needed to represent the views of a particular family. Where a choice needed to be made between separated or divorced parents, preference was given to the participation of the parent having primary custody. I endeavored to include at least one parent of a late-entry student in the focus group in order to garner opinions from that perspective. All parents



were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and were given the opportunity to withdraw from participation at any time.

I am both a parent and a teacher within our French Immersion program. I have worked for the past fourteen years within this school district. While this allows me considerable insight into the issues faced within these realms, my personal experiences might also lead to bias on my part regarding the problems encountered within these roles. The fact that I personally know many of the potential participants in this study must also be considered as this could lead to misinterpretations or assumptions regarding the content of their comments. As well, I had to be cautious in phrasing my questions so as not to lead the groups toward a particular conclusion. According to Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996), "In order to minimize the influence of the moderator's beliefs, attitudes, and expectations on the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, it is imperative that the moderator be aware of any subjective tendencies" (p. 90). In an effort to control for this bias, I enlisted the help of a co-facilitator or moderator aide, whose primary function was to assist with the functioning of the recording equipment, to record non-verbal communication of the participants, and to maintain the speaker's list so as to ensure fair participation of those wishing to contribute (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). I also had my questions screened by my co-facilitator, my administrator and one non-participating parent prior to the focus group meeting.

The focus group meeting took place in the evening in the school library. It was of approximately one hour in duration. The entire proceedings were tape-recorded to allow for ease of transcription, accuracy, and verification of information. I tested the recording equipment by taping portions of a staff meeting, prior to the focus group, as it also took place in the library. In addition to taping the focus group sessions, I also had a co-facilitator present to help address the issues of bias.

To act as co-facilitator, I contacted our District Language (French) Coordinator (a high-school teacher of Core French classes). Her impartiality regarding the teaching of



Immersion and lack of previous contact with the parents who were involved served to provide a balance to my perceptions. Within the focus group sessions she acted as a recorder to write down ideas and issues generated and assisted me in identifying speakers in the group. Following the initial analysis, she provided a sounding board for my perceptions by reviewing the document for accuracy and thoroughness.

### *Data Collection*

Each focus group session followed a two-part format and questions discussed were open-ended (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). In the first half-hour the following questions were addressed: Are there any problems that arise in trying to help your Immersion child at home? If so, what kinds of problems do you face? What kinds of support are you trying to offer? What support do you feel you should offer or are expected to provide? Following this discussion we identified the top three concerns by free vote. The final 30 minutes were devoted to the following question: What would help you provide better support for you Immersion child's learning? Further probes were used in order to clarify ideas presented and to summarize key points.

The co-facilitator kept a speakers list. A sincere effort was made to allow all participants a voice on each question. The freedom to discuss was limited somewhat, due to a request that the parents express their ideas concisely due to time constraints. The co-facilitator also recorded who was speaking as well as evidence of non-verbal communication such as nodding, restlessness, worry or agitation.

Structure for the format of the focus group interview followed a specific plan, often referred to as a moderator's guide. This guide included "(a) introduction, (b) warm-up, (c) clarification of terms, (d) easy and non-threatening questions, (e) more difficult questions, (f) wrap-up, (g) member-check, and (h) closing statements" (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996, p. 41). I began with an introduction and general statement of welcome which served to thank participants for their willingness to participate and to recognize the value of their individual contributions. It was stressed that all members were entitled to

their views and that a full range of ideas and suggestions was desired, not consensus to a particular viewpoint. The overall structure of the session was outlined briefly and the purpose of the study explained. I then asked the parents to simply indicate to the group how many children they had in the program and for how long they had been Immersion students.

The interview itself began with questions regarding the types of support parents find themselves providing at home followed by queries surrounding their perceived expectations of the program. A discussion of any difficulties they face in supporting their child's learning followed. Subsequently I delved into the types of support parents felt they would need to better help their children in their academic learning. I endeavored to highlight any skills parents wished they had, types of activities they desired, and outside resources that they felt might be of value.

A summary followed, which outlined the main issues raised and allowed for a check-in with each participant to be sure the discussion had been effectively encapsulated. The parents indicated that they had more to say, but it was explained that time constraints impeded further discussion and that the ideas gathered were of great value. Finally there was a review of the expectations that information shared by others not be repeated and a reminder that in the transcription the parents' names would not be identified and the tapes would be destroyed after completion of the project.

#### *Analysis and Interpretation of Data*

Within two weeks of the second focus group meeting, the tapes were transcribed and pseudonyms were assigned to help ensure anonymity of the participants. Subsequently, an analysis was made of the key points raised. Following the recommendation of McMillan and Schumacher (1997), a process of inductive analysis was followed as a search was made for threads of commonality, as well as any key differences or contradictions. The questions raised and the resulting responses lent themselves to categorization in two general headings, current supports and problems, and

desired supports and opportunities. Sub-headings emerged involving academic needs, home-school communication issues, and extra-curricular contacts outside of school.

## Results

Nine parents expressed interest in participating in the focus group. All were thanked and invited to attend a single focus group session. Of these, the late-immersion representative had to withdraw due to a family emergency, and two did not arrive for the focus group meeting. On June 17, 2002, six participants, all long-time local residents, and my co-facilitator joined me in the school library. All participants were married and were the parents of primary children. Two participants, Mrs. Barker and Mrs. Foster, indicated they had children in the intermediate grades also. All of their children began French Immersion in Kindergarten in our local program. All of the parents indicated they were Anglophones with no formal French instruction beyond high school second language classes.

### *Current Parent Supports and Problems Encountered*

The parents revealed a number of ways in which they regularly assisted their children. Mrs. Barker noted, "We've set up a kind of a pattern of times that homework is done each day, so that there is that basic time set aside and it gets done." Mrs. Ellis pointed out that "I give her a choice of reading in French or English, although I do monitor so that it is evenly distributed, and once a week my husband will read chapter books with her in French." All speakers mentioned helping their child study their weekly dictée (spelling list), reading to the child in English and French, listening to the child read French, helping to write speeches, and assisting with daily homework. Though the

parents did not state explicitly why they felt these particular activities were important, the fact that all participants consistently mentioned these types of support indicates that they are likely considered to be valuable forms of assistance.

Many problems were noted during the discussion around helping at home. There was a general consensus that these English parents feared mispronouncing French words when reading with their child or practicing dictée. According to Mrs. Ellis, "Sometimes it is difficult when reading French stories to my daughter to know some pronunciation of the words properly, and getting corrected on every second word that I pronounce, and also understanding what I am reading to her." Mrs. Foster indicated conversely "Because I don't read, speak or write French, I don't know if my child is saying the word correctly." She also noted that often she did not know the meaning of the words they were reading, rendering it difficult to discuss main ideas or explain the words.

Writing tasks also proved challenging. "I have difficulty helping him with writing speeches," said Mrs. Gardner, "and he asks me to look up each word and try to figure out how the sentence works. I get really frustrated." Further, Mrs. Dell explained that she was sometimes unable to read the directions and understand the task required. "I have problems with some of the assignments as far as what needs to be done. I am not quite sure if the kids are clear, or because they know I don't know how to read French, so therefore they tell me they don't know either. So sometimes assignments don't get done that should be." Mrs. Dell was concerned that her child may be shirking tasks by professing a lack of understanding. Mrs. Carter added, "I'm worried that she's going to falter when she gets older because I can't help her do the things that might be expected of her then."

Mrs. Ellis indicated that she sometimes felt intimidated and was reluctant to speak to busy teachers. "I find, particularly at this time of the year [i.e., June], but at other times of the year as well, that sometimes the teachers seem so overwhelmed with the teaching and what's going on, and the programming, and you sometimes feel intimidated as parents who want to hang around after school and start asking questions." Mrs. Gardner also expressed that some of the more common suggestions made by teachers, such as watching French television and videos or listening to French radio, were unrealistic as the children could not comprehend the language and quickly lost interest. According to Mrs. Gardner, "(the videos) are not interesting, because at this young age they don't understand, and so for them to sit there and watch it, it is very difficult, so they don't bother. And it is difficult for me to sit there when I can't understand what's going on either." She felt that more realistic expectations would be of benefit.

Mrs. Gardner did not elaborate on what might be considered a more realistic expectation. Later on, however, Mrs. Ellis suggested "It would be nice to have a list from the library as to what's available in the way of videos ... If we have access to some of that in French, we could literally sit down and pick up on some of the French at least and understand what's going on." Mrs. Ellis also pointed out that she encourages her daughter to "take out the French version of what we have at home in English, for example a Franklin book, so that I am on top of what's going on." Finding the French equivalent of a familiar English story might allow these parents and their children to maintain interest and improve their understanding of the French involved. Teachers could be encouraged to make such suggestions.

Mrs. Barker pointed out that the children often rebelled against nightly study sessions and that this opposition became more vociferous in the intermediate grades. She did not feel “that there is more rebellion toward French than English... sometimes they just don’t feel like doing school after school.” Mrs. Gardner found a main frustration with speech writing. According to her “We can’t do this a word at a time; we’ll be here forever.” So time and motivation prove to be challenging issues.

Time and ability appeared also to be a concern in terms of the parents themselves learning French. As Mrs. Barker stated, “I think the biggest thing would be, it would be much easier to be able to speak and read French.” This idea came up frequently and all participants expressed interest in learning at least the basics of French vocabulary and pronunciation. However, Mrs. Foster noted that little time was available for such instruction. “There’s only so much as parents that we can actually learn, unless we go to University or to school, and so you can only expect so much. And I think that when your children are in primary grades, as parents to learn as much as you can, because I think it is unrealistic to actually, like I know myself, there’s no way I could go to class and learn.”

These participants indicated that they spent time working on French homework and reading with their child in both languages. Frustrations encountered involved difficulty understanding French directions, the time-consuming nature of writing in French, and the inability to read or understand correct pronunciation of French texts. There was a concern that students could shirk homework responsibilities by professing a lack of understanding also, and this would result in unfinished assignments. These parents felt they could provide greater assistance at home if they, themselves, had at least

a rudimentary knowledge of French, though time constraints and the adult's ability to learn were considered obstacles.

*The Parent Wish List of Supports and Opportunities*

*Linguistic and academic needs.* These parents were able to clearly define skills and opportunities they would find beneficial in better assisting their children through elementary French Immersion. As mentioned previously, Mrs. Barker said, "I think the biggest thing would be, it would be much easier to be able to speak and read French." Mrs. Carter elaborated, "What I would like to see, and actually one of the reasons I came, is that I would like to have some sort of courses offered in the evening, or during the summer months." Knowledge of French, at least to a minimal level, would allow these parents to feel more helpful, at least during the primary years. Mrs. Carter specified the desire "to be able to read the easy French novels" with her daughter. Most seemed content with a course that would give an overview of the alphabet and counting that they could access during their child's early school years. Mrs. Ellis had clearly reflected on this at length and pointed out, "One idea I've had in my mind for quite a while, and I'm glad to have a chance to say it now, is it would be nice as the children get older and get into the elementary grades, (that) there would be some kind of a little handbook that English-speaking parents could have with brief sentences, ... sentences that you could use almost on a daily basis, 'Come in for dinner', that kind of thing, that you could practice and say in French. And at least your child would realize that you're making an effort to learn along with her and you don't feel so left out of the process and you still feel like you're helping them out".



Along with this, Mrs. Gardner expressed a need for “a brief on ABC’s and counting so that we could help our pre-school children and help with early learning, that would be excellent.” And the parents noted they wanted to continue to read and study in a worthwhile manner even during the summer. Mrs. Carter stated, “Something that I would like to have come home is books, the easy-read books for my child, and things that we could work on, so that it doesn’t stop when the school year is through; (so) that we can continue to work on things at home that need practice.” Yet another related idea emerged supporting the development of a brief curriculum overview for the term. “If we could, every season perhaps, get a one page outline of what’s going to be covered in specific subjects such as in Social Studies, Science” was Mrs. Ellis’ suggestion. A list of French videos and books that could be borrowed from the school and reviewed was also deemed beneficial. In this way, the parents felt they could better focus their study time even if there was no assigned homework. These suggestions and comments indicated that these parents have a great desire to support their child’s learning and that they had reflected on many ideas at length.

The notion of tutoring generated comment also. Mrs. Foster indicated, “We don’t have a list of tutors, and so who do you go to? You go to your child’s teacher, and that (creates) extra time and work...so to have a list of French tutors would be a real benefit”. When probed, the participants indicated unanimous interest in utilizing French tutors but were unaware of how to locate such people. It was clear that parents had received suggestions for extra work or summer practice from some teachers, but were not always able to adequately instruct their child. When prompted regarding their desire for a list of available high school students and French speaking adults who would offer tutoring



services, the group, through consensus, appeared to express both interest and a willingness to pay for such services.

The annual book fair held in the school library also drew comments from the participants. "I found that at the Book Fair, that there haven't been many French books" said Mrs. Gardner. Mrs. Ellis felt the need for a "wish list where we could decide to donate some money" so that specific, useful texts and videos could be acquired for the students during the sale.

Once again the importance of a French course for parents was highlighted through the participants comments. Other suggestions included: a parent handbook, brief curriculum overviews each term, book and video lists, as well as a list of available tutors. Clearly, these parents indicated they were willing to offer both time and money toward further supporting their children's academic learning.

*Communication between home and school.* Communication with the teacher generated a fair amount of discussion. Mrs. Foster pointed out the importance of parent-teacher contact. She said "I think just being parents and being supportive... letting your child know that you care if they are having problems...(involves) going in and seeing the teacher on a regular basis in a casual way.... Regularly, regularly." The group seemed unanimously concerned, though, that teachers always seemed too busy to stop and discuss their child's progress on a drop-in basis, yet keenly aware that they wanted to demonstrate that they care about their child's progress. Mrs. Ellis explained, "I find, particularly at this time of year, but other times of year as well, that sometimes the teachers seem so overwhelmed...and you sometimes feel intimidated as parents who want to hang around after school and start asking questions...So try[ing] to plan around

another time where both parents and teachers are relaxed in a better setting might help.” Mrs. Foster also offered the suggestion that the parent make contact and set up an appointment so that she could be assured the teacher’s undivided attention, “because he or she could be on their way to a meeting, or overwhelmed...I think setting up appointments that work for both the parent and the teacher can alleviate that”. Mrs. Dell, on the other hand, recommended that teachers consider offering up one or two days a week as visiting days, “and that way a parent can kind of plan that Thursdays are a good day, so we’ll probably keep that time available”. This would allow parents to feel at ease in discussing their child’s progress more regularly while allowing the teacher flexibility in controlling the schedule. Again these parents quickly offered detailed suggestions, likely indicating that they had previously reflected on these issues and were willing to participate in problem solving.

Further to the discussion of home-school communication was the idea that the school planners were underutilized. The local Canadian Parents for French group sponsors the purchase for French day planners for each child in Immersion each year. According to Mrs. Barker “I think that with the planners what we have there is a tool available and lots of times it is used for notes back and forth, but I think to encourage that more from the teachers and equally from the parents, and if there is something quick, you know maybe it’s about some topic that they are working on, whether it’s Science or Socials, or whatever, you could just say, this isn’t working for so and so at this time, consider helping in these ways, or whatever. Or come and see me, that kind of thing. That tool could really be utilized in that way”. The body language of other participants, in the form of nodding assent, indicated they too felt it would be beneficial if teachers would

write notes more regularly in the planner, so that they could be alerted to possible concerns without waiting for a formal meeting.

There was also discussion around the fact that Immersion students are offered French planners. Mrs. Carter noted that she was unable to complete the suggested activities because of her lack of understanding of the text “Some of the activities, when we go to do them, I’m looking up every word and making sure that I think I know what it says, but I don’t want to do it incorrectly”. She then queried the possibility of acquiring bilingual planners.

With respect to home-school communication, these parents were adamant about the importance of regular contact with the teacher. They suggested that meetings were more effective if planned in advance or if teachers would offer certain days as available for informal discussions. Bilingual planners and a more regular use of the student planners for relaying information, by way of notes and comments from both parents and teachers, were also recommended.

*Social connections outside of school.* Mrs. Dell reflected that she knew a Francophone couple with school age children and that they had become a strong support network for her family. She noted that “the kids really excelled...they found French as a fun thing rather than an educational thing”. Her children became eager to visit with these friends and readily spoke French with them. Mrs. Ellis noted that they had taken in an exchange student from Trois Rivières, Quebec and that this had very positively influenced the children’s attitudes toward the French language. “It was wonderful. It was an eye-opener for my daughter, even though she is in her early elementary years, to be able to converse with a teenager, get her ideas of experiences, being in different

households (and) traveling.” Furthermore, Mrs. Barker recognized the possibility of exploring French-speaking locales during vacation times, and of inviting Francophone Katimavik participants and French monitors to stay in their home.

Along this vein, Mrs. Barker noted that having an older sibling to model French was useful and that it was important to positively reinforce their use of French, as it would sometimes spontaneously occur. “Having an older sibling really helps with translation and directions for the younger ones, as well as having several children in the French Immersion program, it gives them each other to converse with and sing with and play with. And I find that they do that spontaneously on occasion. The other thing that I find helps is continuous positive reinforcement. Just saying ‘Way to go, you are speaking French...and you’re doing awesome. And we love to hear that’.” Another suggestion, by Mrs. Gardner, related to the possibility of organizing regularly scheduled French playgroups for interested Immersion families. “I think it would be kind of interesting if they had a group where they could just have conversational French, like sort of a play group, where you could just go and people would do games in French, maybe in the summer (or) even during the school year.”

These parents recognized the value of contact with other French-speaking individuals outside of the classroom. Participants also felt their children responded well to positive feedback when they spoke French at home.

### *Summary*

Many ideas surfaced during this focus group discussion. Supporting their children’s academics was clearly a priority for these parents. While they recounted frustrations around assisting with French homework, they were quick to provide

thoughtful suggestions for resolving these difficulties through improved parent-teacher communication and parent involvement. Furthermore, these participants expressed both willingness and desire to offer even more physical and financial resources to improve the level of academic support available for their children.

As a final note, participants chose to outline some successful supports that were already being implemented locally. Mrs. Gardner appreciated the French summer day camp that was offered this year by several teachers. Mrs. Barker mentioned the notes from the teachers regarding dictée, which offered English translations and pronunciation clues. "Teachers make a really good effort to write down instructions in English and sound out the dictée words in English, with the phonetic spelling of them in English, ways that we'll understand". It was also appreciated that many teachers allow parents to generate speech texts for Concours (an annual French speech contest) with their child in English. According to Mrs. Carter, "we just write it in English and then the teachers translate that into French and then as well give a tape so that our children can practice the right pronunciation of all the words." Finally, Mrs. Carter noted with excitement that one teacher had discovered French sites that were available on the Internet, and that French books could, in fact, be downloaded "and it's absolutely wonderful because she can come home and she reads to any family members that will listen to her".

### Discussion

The comments made by the participants of this focus group centered around three main themes: home-school communication, linguistic and academic support, and non-academic connections. Many valuable suggestions emerged and the discussion was

fruitful as a first step toward improving the support network available to our local elementary Immersion students and parents.

As stated previously, past research into parent attitudes surrounding French Immersion centered on satisfaction surveys. This particular research departed from this approach by delving into the specific issue of Anglophone parents providing academic and linguistic support at home. It provided a qualitative sampling of information. Parents were given the opportunity to select topics for discussion and to express their views regarding the difficulties faced when supporting their Immersion child's education at home. In this final section the current findings are assessed in light of the previous related research and possible implications and future directions are discussed.

#### *Linguistic and Academic Needs*

All of the parents in the focus group indicated that they spent time assisting their child with homework on a regular basis. One main difficulty noted was a lack of proficiency in French, which restricted the level of support they could provide. Mrs. Ellis explained, "Sometimes it is difficult when reading French stories to my daughter to know some pronunciation of the words properly ...and also understanding what I am reading to her". Later Mrs. Carter picks up this thread and states, "I would like to have some sort of courses offered in the evening or during the summer months". The Ludanyi (1972) research supports these notions by highlighting the importance of ongoing training for their instructors throughout the implementation of the program. Their sessions focused on linguistics and instructional techniques. This parent sample indicated interest in learning about the basic vocabulary, grammatical constructs of the language, and elements of pronunciation. Mrs. Barker summarized her feelings concisely when she said,

"I think the biggest thing would be, it would be much easier to be able to speak and read French".

This would seem to indicate that our parents might need some formal instruction regarding ways to assist their children at home. A support to consider for future implementation would be a beginner French course for Immersion parents. It is certainly clear that ongoing discussion was key to all programs in the Ludanyi (1972) report and that parents often operate in relative isolation when it comes to helping their children with schoolwork. Perhaps a regular schedule of group meetings would also help bridge the communication gap between the parents of Immersion students, thereby allowing for greater sharing of ideas and instruction of tutorial skills.

The resource document *Using the Foreign Language Assistant: A Guide to Good Practice* (Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges, 1977) held a link to another element that drew marked attention from the focus group: tutoring. Parents in this study indicated that they were providing spelling list and verb practice, helping with speech writing, and reading with their children. Mrs. Foster expressed that "Unless we have French tutors- if our children are having a problem- I don't know how much more as parents that we can actually help them with". When questioned further the group indicated that it had not had contact with local French tutors, but unanimously nodded assent when asked if it would use the services of tutors if available. The British book indicated that French Language Assistants could be hired to provide outside tutoring and instruction to assist with the types of activities parents felt unable to support successfully. This would be possible locally with the cooperation of our French monitors (a resource person provided bi-annually by the federal government) and other interested bilingual



citizens. Services could include tapes of stories, vocabulary and dictée words for student use at home as well as regular tutoring or help with French homework.

Williford (1979) also discusses a potential source of competent tutors in the form of high school Immersion students. In her program the older students were offered credits for providing assistance in oral language skill development within the elementary schools. The efforts were well received and participants at both levels deemed the intervention successful. This certainly suggests that local secondary students could provide extra speaking, reading, and writing practice for these local parents today. It follows that one could suggest that high school students consider developing a setting in which young Immersion students could practice French in a fun, non-school setting as these parents recommended. Mrs. Gardner indicated that it would be nice "if they had some kind of program... (where they) could just go and practice and play in French (that) isn't in the school environment".

Mrs. Gardner and Mrs. Ellis highlighted the need for a brief handout for Immersion parents regarding the main objectives for each term, and an overview of basic French pronunciation and alphabet, as well as lists of associated books, videos and other resources that could be borrowed by parents. Implementation of these ideas hinges on the participation of the French Immersion teachers. Whale (1990) recognized the importance of parents providing such resources as verb books and dictionaries. The school and school district, however, can assist in making available the recommended resources. There is certainly room for investigation and contact with other school districts to find out whether preview and suggested resource documents exist elsewhere. In this way there



might be no need to invent an original work; one could more simply adapt the resource booklets to suit the needs of local parents.

### *Home- School Communication*

The topic of home-school communication is not dealt with in the available research because parents themselves were not directly involved in these studies. In this focus group it was clear that, according to Mrs. Foster, discussions with the teacher were key to assessing the child's progress and to demonstrating the parent's level of caring and concern to the child. Mrs. Dell's suggestion of offering up one or two days per week as open for parent- teacher discussions could be presented to teachers through the monthly French Immersion meetings. The issue of the school planners is also one that can be addressed at the school level. The French Coordinator or school principal could investigate the availability of bilingual planners in response to Mrs. Carter's concern that she was unable to complete the accompanying activities. In the event that only unilingual planners exist, we could consider offering parents the choice of a planner in French or in English prior to placing the annual order.

### *Social Connections Outside of School*

These local parents noted that they had made efforts to provide French experiences outside of the regular school setting for their children. Mrs. Dell mentioned contact with a Francophone family and Mrs. Ellis' family had taken in an exchange student from Québec. Mrs. Gardner also pointed out the advantages of older siblings modeling French and the value of the French summer camp that several of the teachers had offered. These supports were reflected in the research. Ludanyi (1972) indicated the use of songs, games, dances, art and stories were prevalent in their approach in order to

provide a French-Canadian cultural connection. These are precisely the types of things that could be addressed through contact with Francophone people and through participation in French summer camps.

Distance from a French cultural center also figured in the Klinck (1980) study completed in Calgary. She noted that her students indicated a desire for more cultural connections. As a result, she recommended increased use of French videos and television shows, as well as guest speakers and slide shows to help bridge the cultural gap thereby allowing second language learners to witness French in real contexts.

Williford (1979) bears a similar focus in highlighting the conversational aspects of language learning through fashion shows, skits, games and songs. Here we see the benefit of using readily available local French speakers in the form of high school Immersion students who may well find it beneficial also to apply their knowledge of French in new settings such as French camps or playgroups.

All in all, the participants indicated that this focus group meeting had been interesting and informative. In fact, all chose to stay for an hour after the scheduled time to continue the discussion off- the- record. There was interest expressed in regular meetings of this type to share ideas and resources.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### *Implications for Further Research*

Given that few research studies were available related to this question, I find that there are many directions for future exploration. The present study has provided an in-depth look at the ideas and opinions of a group of Anglophone French Immersion parents

from a small city in Northern British Columbia regarding their concerns and the resources they would like to have available to them. Subsequent studies could involve focus groups or individual interviews of parents from other communities of varying size and location. It would also be of benefit to target the needs of the parents of intermediate students more specifically. In addition, responses from larger numbers of parents could be elicited through the use of surveys with the information from this study providing a framework for the questions. This would be of particular benefit in determining whether certain offerings, such as French courses for parents and French summer camps, would be viable locally. Similarly, a survey could be designed to compare the perceived needs of Immersion parents as compared to parents of English students in the regular program.

#### *Recommendations*

The ideas presented by the parents in the course of this focus group interview were practical and worthy of consideration by other parents, French Immersion teachers, the local CPF, and the local school and school district. These parents quickly recognized the value of sharing their concerns and ideas publicly. They were eager to continue the discussion and to recommend that future meetings be planned to continue the dialogue around supporting academics at home. Future discussion times could be planned by the principal, an Immersion teacher or the French Coordinator, or by the local chapter of the CPF using part of their regular monthly meetings.

The CPF could also look into the availability of funds and interest level of their membership regarding a beginner French course for parents. The school district's cooperation could be sought for provision of a locale for the classes and, perhaps, recommendations of qualified individuals. The development of a curriculum outline or

overview booklets could be a project spearheaded by the school district and, since the provincial curriculum is consistent in both English and Immersion, it could even be designed for use by all parents with further suggestions and adaptations specific to the Immersion environment. It would also behoove the school district to offer Career and Personal Planning course credits to high-school Immersion students who tutor elementary students or offer French summer day-camp experiences.

The school could look into the availability of bilingual planners, or alternately offer parents the choice of a planner in French or in English. Dictionaries, verb books and other useful print resources could consistently be made available through the school for parent purchase.

French Immersion teachers could also play an important role in furthering this dialogue. First and foremost, the teachers could participate in any follow-up meetings sparked by this study. If possible, teachers could make available certain days for parents to stay after school to discuss their child's progress. This might be handled through a sign-up sheet on the classroom door or via monthly newsletters and notes in student planners. The teachers and librarian could also make recommendations of familiar English stories and videos that are available in French and could help provide more information about the objectives under study each term.

In terms of providing accountability, the teacher hired as District Language (French) Coordinator would be an excellent liaison between the school district, the high school and elementary school, the parents, and the teachers. This person could be afforded the time and resources to support and follow the implementation of many of these recommendations.

Through the course of this study, I found myself becoming more aware of parent needs as I planned my instruction. It was enlightening to listen to the parent's express empathy for the teachers in terms of their workload. I was heartened by the admission of some to having brought ideas they had wished to share for some time. I have also reflected deeply on many of their suggestions, some I have already implemented. I have also shared some of the ideas with my colleagues. Improved dialogue with the parents of my students has been the greatest benefit I have noted to date. The local CPF has also invited greater input from the teachers regarding the possibilities for tutoring, summer camps, and adult French courses. It is encouraging to see that this focus group study has already helped spark a deeper connection between the parents and the Immersion teachers at our school. Even more powerful would be the continuation of this type of dialogue with parents along with the implementation of the recommendations already made.

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APPENDIX A: Letter of Permission

Belinda Harrison  
3474 Robin Rd.  
Quesnel, B.C.  
V2J 3R2

School Superintendent  
School District  
City  
Postal Code

Dear Sir or Madam,

As you are likely aware, I am a member of the Quesnel Master's cohort through the University of Northern British Columbia. Currently, I am planning a research project as my final step in completing the program. I am writing this letter to request permission to conduct my study. My intent is to set up a focus group of interested Anglophone parents of French Immersion students. Through discussion I hope to determine their primary concerns related to supporting their child's education at home. As well, I will ask them to suggest types of supports they may find useful in allowing them to provide increased academic support.

All French Immersion parents will be invited to participate and one or two focus groups will be designed from among the interested volunteers, with a maximum of 10 participants per group. It is anticipated that the focus group sessions will take place in the school library during the month of June. It will be made clear that parents have the right to withdraw from participating at any time during the study. All information gathered will be kept confidential, though true anonymity cannot be assured due to the open nature of the focus group sessions. Discussions will be tape-recorded with speakers identified by number only. The tapes will subsequently be transcribed and held in a locked filing cabinet at the school until they are destroyed after the completion of the work. All Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The results of the study would be made available to the school district and to the participants.

It is my hope that in allowing parents to voice their concerns and outline their needs, the overall integrity of our school district's French Immersion program could potentially be strengthened. This may result in greater academic success for the students and improved student retention. In addition the teachers and the school district would be in a better position to respond to Immersion parent needs.

I am requesting the school district's permission to conduct this research focus group. I would appreciate your response at the earliest convenient time. If you have any questions, please contact me at 992-8895 or Paul Madak at UNBC, (250) 960-6520. Complaints should be directed to the Office of Research at UNBC. Thank-you for your consideration of this request.

Respectfully yours,

Mrs. Belinda Harrison

APPENDIX B: Request for Focus Group Participation

Dear French Immersion Parent/ Guardian,

I am currently conducting a research study as part of my course requirement toward my Master's degree. My intent is to conduct a focus group interview session allowing English parents to express their needs regarding assisting their French Immersion children at home. There will also be discussion of the types of supports that might be of use to you as Immersion parents. I would like the focus group to be made up of 6 to 10 volunteer participants. The session will take place at the school. The time commitment involved is limited to 60 to 90 minutes for one evening only. Due to the open nature of a discussion group, anonymity cannot be assured, but I will endeavour to assure that confidentiality be maintained throughout the study. Though the session will be tape-recorded, speakers will only be identified by number on the tape and no parent names will appear in the final written project. Upon completion of the study the audiotapes will be destroyed. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from participation at any time.

It is my experience that parents often have questions regarding supporting their child's school learning as these are often expressed to me informally through conversation. The information gathered through the focus group will allow the teachers and the school district to better respond to you specifically as English-speaking Immersion parents in Northern British Columbia. My hope is that by allowing you to identify your needs the overall integrity of the French Immersion Program could potentially be strengthened. This may result in improved academic performance for the children, and improved communication and understanding of the French Immersion curriculum for you.

If you are interested in being a member of this research study focus group, please fill out the attached sheet and return it to the school office or to me as soon as possible. Two weeks from today I will select participants in the order the forms were received. All forms will be date stamped upon receipt. I am requesting that one parent represent the views of a family. It is important to note again that you may withdraw from participation at any time during the study. A copy of the results will be made available to all participants upon completion. If you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to contact me at 992-8895 or 992-8383. Paul Madak is also available through UNBC at (250) 960-6520. Any complaints should be addressed directly to the Office of Research at UNBC. Thank-you for your support.

Sincerely,

Belinda Harrison

**French Immersion Focus Group Consent**

I would like to participate in the French Immersion parent focus group at the elementary school with Belinda Harrison. I have read the information in the attached letter. I understand that my involvement is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

Name of Parent Participant \_\_\_\_\_

My child(ren) is/are in \_\_\_\_ primary \_\_\_\_ intermediate FI (check one or both as applicable)

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C: Sample focus group dialogue

Mrs. Gardner: I have difficulty with the kinds of support that are suggested, the videos, the French television, the French radio, etcetera. And we tried things like that, but because I don't understand French they lose interest. They're not interested because at this young age they don't understand, and so for them to sit there and watch it is very difficult, and so they don't bother. And it is difficult for me to sit there when I can't understand what's going on either.

Mrs. Carter: What I would like, and actually one of the reasons I came is that I would like to have some sort of courses offered in the evening, or during the summer months, for French Immersion parents, so that we can learn along with the kids. And when they get older I am just, like I said before, I'm worried that she's going to falter when she gets older because I can't help her do the things that might be expected of her then.

Mrs. Foster: The kinds of support you want to give, not even being able to speak French, I think just being parents and being supportive in knowing that. It's letting your child know that you care if they are having problems, and that would be going in and seeing the teacher on a regular basis in a casual way. This is what I've tried to do for the last four years with one of my children, and it's, you get lots of information, and I think that's a huge support without actually knowing how to speak and read the language. Regularly, regularly.

Mrs. Ellis: I find, particularly at this time of year, but at other times of year as well, that sometimes the teachers seem so overwhelmed with the teaching and what's going on and the programming, and you sometimes feel intimidated as parents who want to hang around after school and start asking questions, making sure your child is up to what everybody else is doing in school. And you don't want to bother her because she's tired and she still has to do classroom marking before she gets home. So try to plan around another time, where both parents and teacher are relaxed in a better setting might help.

Moderator: The issue of the teacher being overwhelmed and you feel like you're kind of interrupting if you stop and try to get information, is there a way to resolve that? Do you have any suggestions about how we could resolve that issue and help everybody feel more comfortable with it?

Mrs. Foster: I think setting up appointments that are easy for the teacher and the parent, not just going in after school and saying, "I'd like to discuss Joe with you." Because he or she could be on their way to a meeting, or overwhelmed, so I think setting up appointments that work for both the parent and the teacher can alleviate that.

Mrs. Dell: Maybe at the beginning of the year if parents are kind of notified when is a good day or a time to reach the teacher to set up an appointment, and what day would be a good day, and that way a parent can kind of plan that Thursdays are a good day, so we'll probably keep that time available.



Mrs. Barker: Under the category of what we need, I think something that I've found difficult to keep up with sometimes, maybe because we don't come in on a regular basis, is that information on a regular, in a regular way, whether or not there are any obstacles or problems or concerns. And I think that with the planners, what we have there is a tool available, and lots of times it is used for notes back and forth, but I think to encourage that more from the teachers and equally from the parents. And if there is something quick, you know maybe it's about some topic that they are working on, whether it's Science or Socials or whatever, you could just say, this isn't working for so-and-so at this time, consider helping in these ways or whatever. Or come and see me, that kind of thing. That tool could really be utilized in that way, as it is in some cases. I think that's a good tool, especially for bus kids.

Mrs. Foster: On the what do you need question, I think there is only so much as parents, that we can actually learn, unless we go to university or to school, and you can only expect so much. And I think that when your children are in primary grades, as parents you learn as much as you can, because I think it's unrealistic to actually, like I know myself, there's no way I could go to a class and learn. I have Grade 11 French. So I think it's communication and being there lots and that, unless we have French tutors, if our children are having a problem I don't know how much more as parents that we can actually help them with.

Mrs. Dell: I found a great support system. We have a couple of friends that are French, and the kids really excelled...they found French as a fun thing rather than an educational thing. They get together with these friends and speak French with them.